

Tools for the study of early modern German and Latin texts

Since both Latin and German of the early modern period differ from the Latin and German we learn and use today, working with early modern texts requires knowledge of peculiarities and the use of tools.

The German of the early modern period (that is, the period from about 1450 to the 17th century) is called 'Frühneuhochdeutsch' (High German of the early modern era = **Early New High German** = ENHG). It differs from 'Althochdeutsch' (the German of the early Middle Ages), 'Mittelhochdeutsch' (the German of high and late Middle Ages), and 'Neuhochdeutsch' spoken today, as well as from the various stages of development of 'Niederdeutsch' (Low German), the form of German spoken in northern Germany. ENHG is (1) 'High German': i.e., the form of German spoken from the Alps to western and central Germany. It is (2) 'New': i.e., it belongs to the post-medieval linguistic stage to which our modern German also belongs. It is (3) 'Early': i.e., it belongs to the stage of language development that precedes our modern German, despite its close relationship to today's German.

Unlike many Old and Middle High German texts, we can understand ENHG texts relatively well. The grammar, vocabulary, vowels and consonants may seem sometimes strange and unfamiliar to us, but we do not have the feeling that we are dealing with foreign-language texts. But precisely this feeling that the proximity to ENHG is greater than the distance is a problem. For it leads us to believe that we understand the meaning of a text immediately, without noticing that words, constructions, and phrases may say something else. This can be seen, for example, in the 'false friends', in words and phrases that mean something different today than they did in the 16th century. ENHG texts, like foreign language texts, must always be read with a dictionary. Not only unknown or unintelligible words should be looked up, but also seemingly familiar ones. Good pocket dictionaries are:

- ALFRED GÖTZE, Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar, Berlin ⁷1967,
- CHRISTA BAUFELD, Kleins frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch, Tübingen 1996.

In addition, there are several good Middle High German dictionaries that also cover the language of the 15th and 16th centuries, such as

- MATTHIAS LEXER, Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch, vol. 1–3, Leipzig 1872–78,
- MATTHIAS LEXER, Mittelhochdeutsches Taschenwörterbuch, Stuttgart ³⁸1992.

The most comprehensive new dictionary is

- Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch (Berlin/New York 1989seqq.),

but it might also be helpful to consult

- JACOB AND WILHELM GRIMM, Deutsches Wörterbuch (32 volumes, published 1854–1960).

Many dictionaries are also available at www.woerterbuchnetz.de. Especially focused on the Luther language is

- PHILIPP DIETZ, Wörterbuch zu Dr. Martin Luthers deutschen Schriften, Hildesheim ²1973,

which stops at the letter H and continues:

- GUSTAV AND RENATE BEBERMEYER, Wörterbuch zu Martin Luthers deutschen Schriften. Wortmonographien zum Lutherwortschatz, Hildesheim 1993seqq.

A look at a grammar may also be helpful:

- HERMANN PAUL, Mittelhochdeutsche Grammatik, revised by Peter Wehl and Siegfried Grosse, Tübingen 1998.

For more information on these and other resources, as well as examples of the particular difficulties of ENHG for today's readers, see

- FRÉDÉRIC HARTWEG AND KLAUS-PETER WEGERA, Frühneuhochdeutsch. Eine Einführung in die deutsche Sprache des Spätmittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit, Tübingen 2005,
- HELMAR JUNGHANS, Interpunktion und Großschreibung in Texten der Lutherzeit (Lutherjahrbuch 74, 2007, 153–80),
- JOACHIM SCHILDT, Zum Verständnis der Luthersprache (in: MARTIN LUTHER, Studienausgabe, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius, vol. 1, Berlin 1979, 13–28),
- BIRGIT STOLT, Germanistische Hilfsmittel zum Lutherstudium (Lutherjahrbuch 46, 1979, 120–35).

The **Latin** of the early modern period is 1,500 years later than the classical Latin at the time of Cicero and Caesar, which is still authoritative for the teaching of Latin today. This long period has left less of a mark on Latin than one might think. In particular, the humanist appreciation of classical Latin reversed many of the specific developments of medieval Latin. Nevertheless, in order to understand Latin texts of the Reformation period, one always needs information that traditional school grammars and dictionaries do not contain. Unfortunately, there are hardly any special aids, as there are for Early New High German. An overview is given by

- JOHANNES SCHILLING, Latinistische Hilfsmittel zum Lutherstudium (Lutherjahrbuch 55, 1988, 83–101).

Most of the Latin-English dictionaries do not cover Middle Latin vocabulary. For medieval and early modern Latin, there are several specialized dictionaries and glossaries that may be helpful in individual cases where other dictionaries do not provide information, e.g.

- JAN FREDERIK NIERMEYER, Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus. Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch, two volumes, Leiden 2002 (contains also English translations),
- ALEXANDER SOUTER, A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D., Oxford 1949.

In addition, the currently most comprehensive Latin dictionary, the

- Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (also available online)

should be consulted. There are several specialized dictionaries for Christian Latin, but they are of limited value for the early modern period:

- LEO F. STELTEN, Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin, Peabody 1995,
- ALBERT SLEUMER, Kirchenlateinisches Wörterbuch, ND Hildesheim 1990.

The grammar of early modern Latin is basically the same as that of classical Latin. Unusual

linguistic phenomena can be explained with the help of dictionaries or detailed Latin grammar textbooks. In orthography, variations and idiosyncrasies are to be expected; often words are written as they are spoken, and abbreviations might be used.